

MINORITY REPORT.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

Newsweek

Time

U.S. News & World Report

NATION p78
Date 17 July 89

Barbara Honegger's book, *October Surprise*, is a classic demonstration of how not to write about that nagging problem of our time, criminal covert activity among the governing elite. Those who have had a chance to review the evidence will know by now that there is an excellent prima facie case for believing that the Reagan-Bush 1980 election team attempted to derail President Carter's negotiations for the return of the American hostages from Iran. They will see the logic of the derailment in a context that has since become evident: the secret supply of arms to the Khomeini regime. They will appreciate that the tempo of later events makes sense if a promise to this effect had been made early on. They will also grasp the reason for the exceptional feebleness of executive and Congressional "investigations" of Iran/contras skullduggery—feebleness now exposed by a flow of "mislaidd" documents whose release would have made a difference only at the time. The very haste of the cover-up was an index of desperation. If the original sin of the Reagan-Bush regime had ever become public, something more than a constitutional spasm would have resulted. There would have been a Shakespearean crisis of legitimacy in the state. Apparently, or so my betters tell me, we're not ready for that.

How does Honegger approach this grave matter? She begins:

During my nearly four years as a political appointee in the Reagan-Bush national campaign, transition team, White House, and Department of Justice, I grew not only to like, but to love Ronald Reagan as an individual. . . . I believed then, *as I do now*, that he was the right personality at the right time, needed to heal the nation. [Emphasis added.]

If I was embarking on something as weighty as Honegger's attempt to convince us all of the existence of high treason, I might not have begun with the admission that I was an airhead who was ready to believe any damn thing. Nor would I have gone on, a few pages later, to say this:

When a theory explains so many acknowledged and otherwise inexplicable facts, it deserves to be classed as a fact itself.

This is just what is *not* meant by the usefulness of a theory. As I myself modestly put it, in a column on the *October Surprise* [see "Minority Report," July 4/11, 1987], a theory that fits all the known facts usually has some merit, but it does need to be tested. How can it be tested by someone who has no discriminating faculty in reviewing the evidence? In an epilogue to this undigested heap of a book, Honegger lists people connected with the scandal who have since died. The list includes William Casey, whose death was perhaps opportune but not mysterious, and the arms dealer Cyrus Hashemi, about whose death I *would* like to know more. It also includes a number of people whose connection to the story is barely tangential. And it contains the following entry:

- DEAD: ABBIE HOFFMAN, social activist, who was found dead in his home on April 12, 1989. Press reports of Hoffman's death noted that he had been depressed about an automobile accident, which had occurred some months

before. This accident happened just before Mr. Hoffman was to deliver his manuscript entitled "An Election Held Hostage" to *Playboy* magazine's offices in Chicago in the summer of 1988.

How cunning of the invisible government to leave only Barbara Honegger alive to promote her book. By her own standard, she must be an agent of influence for the grand conspiracy. Come to think of it . . . but *noah*.

To the paranoid mind all things are connected. I have often mocked those whose world view is so cautious that they no longer believe in anything but coincidence. But this is ridiculous:

According to senior White House correspondent Sarah McClendon, the Secret Service agents who accompanied President Reagan as he approached his waiting limousine outside the Washington Hilton Hotel on the morning of March 30, 1981, were not in their usual tight formation around the commander-in-chief.

Perhaps with her eyes still dimmed by an old love, Honegger infers that this unremarkable observation helps prove an Iranian connection to John Hinckley's attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan.

Or there is this, offered with suggestive menace as an explanation for Robert McFarlane's overdose of Valium the night before he was to testify to the Tower commission:

Given that press reports at the time noted that taking Valium is a notoriously unsuccessful way of committing suicide, it is interesting that CIA Director William Casey later boasted that a lie detector could be fooled "with Valium and a few tricks."

Except that McFarlane wasn't going to take a lie-detector test. He was about to testify before his old employer and crony, whose commission screened out only those people who were prepared to tell the truth. The end result of paranoia here is that it makes the official self-invigilation look *better* than it actually was.

A key weasel word in published efforts of this kind is "reportedly." An innocuous word on the face of it, but one that always makes me put my hand on my wallet. This book employs "reportedly" as a kind of mantra. Cyrus Hashemi was "reportedly" the New York chief for Khomeini's secret police, Savama; the SATI Company of Switzerland "reportedly" dealt with top members of the notorious Italian secret society P-2; Richard Secord and Oliver North "reportedly" met with the Iranian Ambassador to Bonn in 1984. Well, did they or didn't they? I believe that those who wield power are implicitly capable of anything, which makes me even keener than the next person to be absolutely specific and certain about what they did this time or that time.

Intended perhaps to be definitive and hard-nosed, this book is diffuse and naïve. It even advances the theory that the *mysteriously* dead Bill Casey, just before his turn came to testify and just before his brain seizure, "told his long time friend and personal counsel that he had decided to tell everything he knew." If you believe that. . . .